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Duxbury Mariner

# A Perception of Duxbury's 'Landscape'

## That's All Over but Black and White

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— George Creamer

By Laura Collins-Hughes

**G**eorge Creamer is accustomed to working with color, and lots of it.

From sculptures filled with colored lights to great works of art reconstructed using happy-face stickers, Creamer's creations of the past several years have been all over the color spectrum. But when he came to Duxbury to make an installation for the Art Complex Museum, his usual modus operandi didn't fit.

"I didn't want to make me the issue," says the Weston artist, who was aiming with this project to question accepted

beliefs about the landscape: what's natural, what's made by humans, and how the two intersect and blend together. In order to do that, he radically changed his approach, opting this time to work with antique postcards, photocopied again and again in black and white.

But his view of the Duxbury landscape is anything but black and white.

"What some might see as a natural and seamless entity untouched by man is, in fact, an environment that has been largely scripted," says Creamer, whose research on the topic included not simply getting to know Duxbury and its history but distributing questionnaires to locals, asking them about the landscape and their responses to it.

The installation he ended up creating — "Landscape Under Construction," four huge images of Duxbury as it used to be and, to a great extent, still is — surprised even him. So did what he learned about his own beliefs about the landscape, perhaps particularly his assumption that the area near the Bluefish River bridge, his favorite place in town, had always been the tranquil spot it is now. Rather, he found, it was once the site of shipyards and other industry.

"I was shocked to discover that what I presumed to be sort of a direct con-

George Creamer's installation, "Landscape Under Construction," uses oversized photocopies of antique postcards to make a statement about the intersection of cultural and natural sources in the Duxbury landscape.

Photo Courtesy of the Art Complex Museum

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nection with the past was, in fact, a landscape that I imagined to be a connection," he says.

Likewise, he notes, the antique postcard of Duxbury Beach that he used may have been doctored before it was even printed.

"What is truthful at this point?" he asks. "Nothing's real here."

The Bluefish River is not included in "Landscape Under Construction" because the scene Creamer found of it was "not as reproducible" as the others. Those he did choose, however — Duxbury Beach, Washington Street, Powder Point and tall ships at Snug Harbor — should be instantly recognizable to anyone familiar with the town.

From a distance, Creamer's creations, each measuring more than 8 by 13 feet, look like the single images they originally were. But closer inspection reveals that each is made up of many pieces of paper fitted together in a grid, quilt-style, on pieces of fabric.

Beginning as postcards Creamer discovered at the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society, the images were photographed first, printed in reverse, then enlarged again and again on a photocopier. Generations of photocopies later, the images, which Creamer had enhanced in some places with white-out and charcoal, were pixelized and distorted.

The artist then took the pieces of paper — rather than standard 8-1/2-by-11-inch sheets, they are variable sizes, he emphasizes: "graspable but not practical, not utilitarian, not literal" — and attached them vertically to muslin, hung them from the ceiling at the Art Complex Museum, anchored them to the floor with concrete moorings and lighted them from behind.

Duxbury's history as a ship-building capital is reflected in the muslin's sail-like quality, enhanced by the grommets Creamer sewed into each piece of fabric and the rope lines that secure them to the museum's high ceiling and the floor below. The exhibit's curator, Lisa Weber Greenberg, also points out that the translucent muslin is "a metaphor for the coast — a sometimes fragile membrane separating the land and sea."

Creamer, who was attracted to the idea of doing an installation at the museum largely because of Greenberg, a colleague he had worked with at the DeCordova Museum, credits the Rural and Historical Society's Alexandra Earle with pointing him in the right direction when she told him about the Bluefish River. At that point, he says, "the lights went off" in his head. But, he says, Earle also served as his measure of whether he, as an outsider, was "overstepping an implied line that exists within the consciousness of the town" — a potential pitfall of which he was acutely aware.

"Just to receive that vote of confidence from someone so vested in that landscape was, to me, a real shot in the arm," he says.

And when he showed her the text he had written to go with the exhibit, she gave him even more feedback.

"Not only did she correct me factually," he laughs, "but she had some grammatical changes as well."

The divergence of "Landscape Under Construction" from Creamer's past work is not only in its substance but in its attitude.

"There's always been a sort of disrespectful, comedic, ironic quality to my work," says the 45-year-old artist, who compares his

illuminated plastic and metal sculpture to "Pee-Wee Herman's or punked-out David Smith work."

But that irony doesn't make an appearance here.

"I think there's a tweaking. I think there's a playing," Creamer says. "But nobody owns a David Smith sculpture the way people are invested in the Duxbury landscape. I think there's a much greater potential to do harm."

This time, while he does want to provoke people into thinking about the landscape that surrounds them, he joins them in their respect for a place that he says is "like a town out of time."

"I'm stunned at how respectful the people in town are of its history, and I think it goes back generations," he says. "I can't think of another seacoast town where you can drive down the street and see the ocean as frequently as you can from (Washington Street). Which I think is a really nice gesture. It allows people to share the ocean."

But how it got to be that way is not necessarily the way one might assume. There is, Creamer says, a "sort of wonderful reciprocity" between humans and nature in creating any landscape.

"I hope people see the landscape," he says, "as this sort of site-specific work, a collaboration."

"Landscape Under Construction" is on exhibit through Sept. 8 at the Art Complex Museum, 189 Alden St. Museum hours are Wednesday through Sunday from 1 to 4 p.m. Admission is free. For information, call 934-6634.

